

The last word The public sphere

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from *Jump Cut*, no. 42, December 1998, pp. 135, 138

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About a year ago, I heard on a radio news show that some survey had determined that most Americans get most of their information about current political events most of the time from the standup routines of late night TV talk shows. In other words, Jay Leno is more influential on "discourse in the public sphere" than George Will, Pat Robertson, Sam Donaldson, or Jim Lehrer. While the data was offered in the obvious ploy — to give intellectuals something to deplore about the media and the decline of the polity — I counter-intuited a different lesson, and began watching Leno's monologue, whenever I could catch it, with this in mind. My conclusion is simple: In the year of the Monica/Bill scandal, Leno gave you all you really needed to know in an efficient, quick, and humorous way.

In contrast, the proliferated cable news and commentary shows on CNBC, MSNBC, American Vision (extreme rightwing), etc. produced hour after hour of wailing, guessing, moaning, mock outrage, mock worrying, and spin drivel to no effect at all. When the story broke, one channel's daily "White House in Crisis" show ate up primetime with a seemingly endless house of mirrors effect.

Of course The Scandal fuels seemingly endless liberal-to-left handwringing about the decline of political discourse in the United States, the prevalence of attack ads, and negative ads and now 10-second slogan ads. But no one seems to ask the obvious question — what does more information really get you? In the U.S. two-party system, what more do you need to know than that Ken Starr is a priggish, anal retentive obsessive and Bill Clinton a womanizing pathological liar-by-stretching-definitions? Or what do I need to know, as an Illinois resident, of the position papers of Carol Mosely-Braun and Peter Fitzgerald? The party labels tell me enough, and the attack ads just flesh it out a tiny bit. Yes, I deplore the Senator's trip to Nigeria and praise for its dictator. But knowing she has no significant influence in Africa policy, what does it matter? I'm much more disturbed and angered by her being in the hip pocket of pharmaceutical giant Glaxo-Wellcome (a story detailed a while back in *The Nation*). But, faced with a Republican who consistently voted against gun control and to abolish the Department of Education, who else would I vote for?

Forgive me, earnest followers of political events, for being a leftist who hasn't looked at position papers since my 8th grade civics class had it as an assignment. And forgive my cynicism, which emerged after voting for Lyndon Johnson in my first presidential election because "he won't get us into a war like Goldwater will."

But The Scandal does raise some interesting media matters. When we have a long drawn out media spectacle (as with OJ, to use another example), as opposed to a short or single dramatic one (Gulf War, death of Diana, the Home Run race), or a perennial one (abortion, war against drugs, affirmative action), we have a new form of public discourse, a different mediated public sphere, one which not only allows, but thrives on spreading discourse to a wider audience.

Today the professional worriers are alarmed that young school children know about oral sex. But isn't that a great improvement in social knowledge? Isn't it good for kids to realize that when they become sexually active, they can practice this (relatively) safe, assuredly non-procreative, sex? In other words, the Starr report was so instantly available on the Internet that most teens know how to use better than their parents. And the report was posted not on porn sites, but on the web pages of major newspapers and TV stations. It tells us the Good News that the President enjoys phone sex (another safe sex practice), and proliferates speculation that the Clintons have an Open Marriage, that Hillary is bisexual, etc., etc. Whatever immediate embarrassment all this may produce, it's clear that once again the media has pushed us across another threshold which in the long run almost inevitably leads to greater tolerance. The Scandal has reduced the age at which people become aware of diverse sexual practices and expanded the audience into the most conservative parts of the culture. The information is unavoidable, and the long-term effects of that information diffusion are interesting.

Perhaps the most telling long view lesson that emerges is just how little the Right understands its own use of the media. Back in the early months of the Clinton Presidency when Rush Limbaugh had a TV show, his smuttiness in pursuit of the Clintons knew no limits. Case in point, playing an excerpt from an Al Gore press conference, where the VP answers a reporter's question about the appropriateness of Hillary Clinton being an unelected, unappointed advisor on major policy. Gore's reply, "You have to realize that Hillary gives very good..." The VP's remarks freeze frame while a window insert shows Limbaugh chortling while the studio audience of Dittoheads draws the smutty conclusion, "...head," Then Gore finishes, "...advice." Republicans who had nothing to criticize with their guy dishing dirty jokes against the Clintons have no moral ground for outrage at Presidential sexual misbehavior. The craziness of the anti-Clinton cohort is extreme within their own coalition, as they manage to alienate moderates, and do less and less in terms of building and maintaining a grassroots base. Pat Robertson sells the Family Channel, certainly a plum of the Christian Right, to Murdoch, and a few weeks later the new Fox Family Channel begins reruns of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, vindicating the same Paul Reubens that Robertson wrinkled his nose at when the actor was arrested for masturbating in a porn theatre.

The center of gravity in discussing sex in the dear old "public sphere" has shifted

decisively. And in the private sphere too, if we follow polling that indicates more people are talking about sexual practices and behaviors post-Monica. Now it's not only Jerry Springer who is bringing us the entertainment of the fallout from adulterous liaisons. While HBO and Showtime titillate us with simulated sex and frontal nudity, the Internet gives us Bert and Ernie visiting a strip club. But it's the daily newspaper which reprints the Starr report, and the CBS affiliate which has it on their website. How then can intellectuals and Christian conservatives be outraged at Howard Stern, deplore *South Park*, and call *There's Something About Mary* toilet humor, without seeming to be totally out of touch with the everyday media world?

Of course the contradictory and recuperative powers of the media are immense. Jay Leno regularly features a segment called "Jay Walking," in which he interviews people in public places with simple quizzes on stuff like current events, geography, elementary school "facts." And as edited, the people always seem totally blitzed out and vacuous — good for a joke. But, how much do you really need to know, and what do you need to know? To participate in the Habermasian public sphere, does anyone really need the detail of the Starr report? Isn't it there just for cheap titillation, for schoolboy humor, for Dittohead self-confirmation? The general public was already filled in from Leno's daily jokes on the latest Starr press leak, and then going to summer's biggest box office comedy, people were laughing to see Cameron Diaz pluck "hair gel" from Ben Stiller's ear. The common sense and sense of humor of most people is the main story. The sphere of public discourse includes gross out jokes and acknowledgement of the commonness of oral sex. The self-righteous Right loses again on the cultural terrain.

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